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Selections from RALPH WALDO EMERSON

EDITED BY Stephen E. Whicher

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Ralph Waldo Emerson



AN ORGANIC ANTHOLOGY

EDITED BY

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CORNELL UNIVERSITY

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Foreword

He in whom the love of truth predominates will keep himself aloof from all the moorings, and afloat. He will abstain from dogmatism, and recognize all the opposite negations between which, as walls, his being is swung.

The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul.

THE PURPOSE of this volume is to encourage a fresh approach to Emerson. Its aim is to shift attention from the familiar teacher and preacher of the essays to the "active soul" of his neglected masterwork, the journals. In so doing it responds to the modern re-evaluation of Emerson, which stresses not his doctrine but his spirit and method, his enactment of the self-created role of Man Thinking.

Thinking, for Emerson, was not the contemplation of final Truth, but the daily encounter of an active mind with its environment; it was not a special activity but life itself. His lifelong enterprise was what has been the main enterprise of the American imagination: to launch filaments of order, like Whitman's spider, over the unknown until they catch somewhere on experience. His journals, with the essays and poems that grew from them, are among the most impressive quests for order which America has yet produced. Once we come, through them, to participate in the whole life of the man's mind, we discover a strongly living Emerson and are redeemed from facile condescension.

This book therefore departs from the plan of conventional anthologies, which have printed excerpts from the journals in a separate section if at all. Instead, it is built on journal passages, amounting to about a third of the total text, which are carefully chosen to convey the organic continuity and dynamic range of Emerson's thought as we experience it in the complete journals. From the matrix of this miniature journal the twelve and a half

essays here included should emerge, not as meteors from the tenth heaven, but as natural growths from the soil of his thought at the time of their writing. Thus even the *Divinity School Address*, often omitted in other anthologies, is here reinvigorated by its journal context and restored to its rightful place as marking a critical moment in the story of Emerson's thought.

The order of selections is generally chronological but not mechanically so. Passages are often juxtaposed to link with or strike sparks from each other, always with the intent to bring out not just the particular passage but the whole life of the mind from which it sprang. More broadly, the selections are grouped into ten chronological sections (an eleventh contains the poems), each with an introduction of its own. No other scheme makes possible in a single volume that integration of the public with the private Emerson which alone can give new life to the whole man.

Introduction

BY STEPHEN E. WHICHER

EMERSON is one of America's best known authors and one of the least known. The reason is that he fought two battles at once: a public and a private one. Though neither was easy, he succeeded all too well for his present reputation in the first, becoming one of the spiritual leaders of his era. Now that the issues have altered it appears that this leader is being abandoned. The result, however, is not to discredit Emerson, as some have hastily decided, but to bring to light a second figure who, it turns out, was fighting part of our battle all along. The purpose of these selections is to throw Emerson's work into such a perspective as will permit him to speak to us. A generous reading is necessary, certainly, one that will suspend judgment and use imagination to see past the familiar public image to the man. The reward will be to re-establish communication with one of the seminal minds of our literature.

Undeniably, as Henry James said, "there were certain chords in Emerson that did not vibrate at all" — notably the chord of outgoing affection and compassion which we rightly value in other authors. He was condemned by temperament, much against his will, to a lonely life of the mind. But this limitation was his strength and his opportunity. Because he was distracted by little else he experienced and conveyed the adventure of thought, the daily plunge of the mind into the unknown, with an urgency almost unique in literature. If the function of an artist is to bring something to life for us, to make us see, then Emerson is an artist who makes us see the creative energy of thinking, the original leap and grasp of the mind in action. His achievement can be described, with little adaptation, in the words Coleridge used to describe Wordsworth's purpose in *Lyrical Ballads*: "... to give the charm of novelty to a *thing* of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention to the lethargy of custom, and directing it to ... the wonders of the *power within* us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish

solicitude we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and *minds* that neither feel nor understand." *

This way of seeing Emerson is relatively new and must still compete with his older reputation as a religious teacher, "the friend and aider of those who would live in the spirit," as Matthew Arnold called him, a reputation which reached a high point at the time of his death in 1882 and held firm until about 1930. He was then subjected to wholesale attack as a friend and aider of juveniles (Adams) or of juvenile delinquents (Winters) and his stock took a sharp drop. At the present time it shows signs of recovery. Current research is greatly enlarging our picture of the range and creative vigor of his reading. Recent studies of his "angle of vision" or "formalistic method" or "sacred science" or use of the "organic metaphor" have also revealed an original and athletic mind at work to throw into a large, fresh perspective the central issues of the day. These and other investigations are steadily directing attention away from the conclusions of his thought to a remarkable man thinking. Their cumulative effect is to make possible a fresh reading of Emerson. That is also the aim of the present anthology.

Its guiding point of view was well stated by an early German reader of Emerson, Herman Grimm: "What he has written is like life itself—the unbroken thread ever lengthened through the addition of the small events which make up each day's experience. . . . His sentences are a series of thoughts. He begins as if continuing a discourse whose opening we had not heard, and ends as if only pausing to take breath before going on." One gradually comes to realize that all his work is like one great essay, whose subject is "Man Thinking." Or put it that he is essentially a journalist, an intellectual diarist, and that his essays and lectures take their place as an extension of his daily autobiography. Each selection in this book is accordingly intended to have a double interest: in itself, and as part of his continuing discourse. For this reason the arrangement is in general chronological but with some grouping also to permit passages to comment on each other. Similarly the essays that are included complete are set in their chronological context and also when possible in one that suggests the lines of thought which led to them. The various headnotes

* *Biographia Literaria*, Chapter XIV, second paragraph. The italicized words are altered from the original.

distributed through the text are designed to call attention to what was most alive in Emerson's thought at a given period. The central purpose is to create in miniature the same sense of the "life itself" of a mind which is created by his work as a whole.* The particular issues he faced, the ideas he used as weapons, the specific content of his thought may now belong in large part to a past age. His "natural history" of a mind at work to build its own world from the materials at hand is emerging to new life.

II

The particular issues Emerson faced are nevertheless important to understand; thought that matters is concerned with problems that matter. Emerson's service to his contemporaries was to meet a spiritual emergency. His story has its heroism, for leadership has seldom grown from more crippling beginnings. One of five sons of a minister's widow, church-poor, tubercular, provincially educated, a "prodigy of shyness" like so many of his tribe, zealously orthodox, no more seemed possible for him than the traditional round of the New England preacher, if indeed he did not die before beginning his work, as was true of two of his brothers. By the time he began his ministry, however, even this career was closing to him. The Unitarian church he had entered was the extreme liberal wing of the New England church of his day, heavily influenced by the rationalism of the eighteenth century. In the name of reason Unitarians had attacked and rejected a number of the central doctrines of the still dominant Calvinism, notably the "monstrous" doctrine of man's total depravity by nature. Although they still accepted the Christian revelation to which the Calvinists appealed, therefore, they were forced in effect to subject it to the test of reason and to abandon the unquestioning submission to God's arbitrary sovereignty which had been Calvinism's secret strength. By the time Emerson was reaching maturity, however, they had become uneasily aware that not merely Christian revelation but all the tenets of supposedly "rational religion" — immortality, the moral law, the very existence of God — had been repeatedly and plausibly challenged in the name of the same reason on which they relied. French

* For convenience of use, the poems are grouped together in one place. They also are arranged in rough chronological order and are tied to the prose by a number of cross-references.

materialists, German higher critics, above all the "Scotch Goliath," David Hume, haunted their councils, yearly refuted and yearly rising up to be refuted once more. The net result of these rumors of rational irreligion was to shake the authority of reason as the Unitarians had previously shaken the authority of revelation. Consequently the young minister found himself, without quite knowing how he came there, standing disarmed before the threat of unbelief, face to face, as he once put it, with "the ghastly reality of things."

In this end was his beginning. A stubborn independence lay beneath his quiet reserve; he met the threat of annihilation with the will of a born warrior. Fortunately reinforcements were at hand. His crisis of faith was a late American analogue to the crises that had faced a series of Europeans from Goethe to Carlyle, for whom the rational world of the eighteenth century, "locked and chained" in the law of physical cause and effect, had become a world of death. From such sources, by a "shock of recognition" more than by any close study, he caught the characteristic tactic by which they went about to solve the problem of freedom in a world of fate: they superimposed the first on the second. Above the mechanical system of necessity in which man was an ordered part like any other collocation of atoms was a vital world of freedom of which man's free spirit gave him immediate warrant. As Kant had put it, though the order of necessity admitted no rational exception, the rational conduct of life demanded that man live *as if* he were free. Or in the words of Coleridge's "Mystos," "The world in which I exist is another world indeed, but not to come."

The transformation this new light caused in the shy young Unitarian was no less decisive for being gradual. Abandoning with relief all allegiance to historical Christianity, he rested his faith on the "other world" of God and Freedom assured him by his own immediate intuitions. Both historical revelation and discursive reason were made superfluous by this continuing revelation within him: "The faith is the evidence." The soul of man did not merely contain, as Unitarians had believed, a spark or light of God; it *was* God. An astonishing surge of power and confidence followed the discovery of this reservoir of faith and strength within himself. Thereafter life acquired a new dimension. Unlike Melville, his tragic complement, he could counter his

problems by transcending them. Readers of these selections will notice how regularly they are controlled by an outward expansion from his private self to the "Universal" and then a return to the "conduct of life." He made it his chief task as a writer "to celebrate the spiritual powers in their infinite contrast to the mechanical powers and the mechanical philosophy of this time." His success is writ large in the literature, the philosophy and the religion of America from his day to our own.

III

The road he opened to his contemporaries, however, is largely closed to us. Modern thought, as reoriented since Darwin, makes possible and necessary a union of "Mind" and "Nature" on a naturalistic basis to which such naive Idealism no longer seems relevant. Though we can and must share his vision, by a willing suspension of disbelief, if we are to read him at all, relatively few readers now find him a source of faith. Theological seminaries ignore him. Moreover, we see more clearly than his contemporaries could how much his thought was, in Santayana's words, "not a philosophy passing into a religion, but a religion expressing itself as a philosophy." Much of his teaching — Compensation is a plain case — is essentially "reminiscent Puritanism" thinly disguised as philosophy, and as these ways of thought have dropped into the past it also has lost cogency. Even his beloved Self-Reliance, whose Puritan derivation is certainly less evident, has faded badly, now seeming unacceptable with its religious basis and unimpressive without it.

The first step toward a living Emerson, as his best readers have always seen, is to move behind the teacher to the man. When we put aside the mantle of dignity in which Emerson felt it necessary to wrap himself and read him with an ear for the human overtones of his words, we begin to see a far more complex and interesting figure. Our ruling impression then becomes one of forces in collision, an action and reaction from which his doctrines and his whole literary work were ejected at high pressure. One main force is a passion for freedom, an almost desperate need for release, expansion, power; to which is matched a fixed decorum that holds him fast in a narrow mold and cannot expand or give. Nature is in undeclared rebellion against second nature. Quite unlike the Olympian Emerson of legend, the man divides

through the middle into the elements of the culture-bound and the autonomous, the lawful and the anarchic, the conventional and the wild. Thus in his political opinions he became for a while a total-minded radical who contemplated the existing structure of society with the contempt of a Gulliver among Lilliputians, or a Communist among New Dealers; yet in the same years whenever confronted with a specific choice between political possibilities he instinctively preferred the conservative option.

The closer we approach him, in fact, the more we realize how entirely his thought was controlled by a shifting, complex dialectic of opposites: a painful conflict, for example, between his wish for companionship and his "doom" of solitude; a mingled revulsion at and devotion to the confined life of the "scholar"; an alternation between his active and passive impulses, the egoist and the "Buddhist"; and others besides. "The path of life," Frederick Woodbridge once wrote, "is not around a center, but generated by the push and pull of contrary directions." We move in ellipses, not circles. Emerson is a central instance of this truth. Though he dreamed of intellectual system and much regretted his lack of it, his thought survives precisely because he refused to violate its living multiplicity with an imposed unity. Instead his guiding conviction that the unfettered action of the whole mind bears truth as naturally as a tree bears fruit led him to a radically organic method of thought whose modernity is still not adequately recognized.

IV

To see Emerson's original approach to the enterprise of thought we must return to his starting point, the moment of immediate insight. This was not only, he came to believe, the source of a special kind of truth; it was the source of any truth. In fact, truth existed, lived only in a present act of vision and ceased to live as that ended. Such an act did not have merely an instrumental value as it led to a "true" statement; rather, the statement it led to was to be valued as an organic part of the process that created it. What mattered, then, was not so much truth as truth-making, not thoughts but thinking. It was not important that the statement of one moment might contradict that of another. Emerson's verdict here was simple and final: "Damn consistency!" Any statement of truth is necessarily partial anyhow and implies

the potential truth of its opposite also. The essential thing is not any given insight but the vital capacity to move from one to the next according to the natural rhythm of thought. The life of the mind is a perpetual voyage of discovery, a swinging of one circle around the last with no end but "old age."

A failure to appreciate his method is responsible for a number of traditional errors about Emerson; for example, that he was not aware of evil. Preoccupied with his voyage of mind, reassured by the Over-Soul, hardened by the "cosmic optimism" he inherited from his ancestors, he certainly did not have what is conventionally considered a tragic view of life; but it is simply not true that he did not feel the reality of evil. He felt keenly — *his* evil; what that was is not hard to see. Since the active soul was for him "the one thing in the world, of value," it follows that the inactive soul was his evil — and that is what we find. "Sleep," "indigence of vital power," "routine" — a lament at *incapacity* runs in a recurrent elegiac refrain throughout his work, especially in the difficult years of the 1840's when he was freshly conscious of it. Counterpointing his regret is a savage scorn of the "dead alive" whose souls are never active at all. While his faith in the God Within affirmed "the perfect Adam" in the heart, in this original nonentity he found his own Fall of Man. His affirmative good was constantly blotted out from him by some pervasive shadowy negative, for which there was finally no remedy but the stoic patience that was so conspicuous a part of his character. "Our faith comes in moments; our vice is habitual," he wrote at the start of his most affirmative essay. In darker moods, which were not infrequent, he felt almost swallowed up in illusion, vacancy, unreality. In our time, writes Paul Tillich, "the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness is dominant. We are under the threat of spiritual non-being." Emerson listed "the trials of this age" as "early old age, pyrrhonism,* and apathy." Granted that he had a source of reassurance denied most of us, it would still seem possible that his condition was much closer to ours than we now credit.

An insight into his method also helps to clear up some persistent misapprehensions about what he is doing as a writer. Most of them proceed from the assumption that he is some kind of philosopher, or at least a "sage." This old mistake blocks him

* A comprehensive skepticism.

off from us, as every collection of "Nuggets from Emerson" demonstrates. A favorable and not unjust way to put the matter is his own: "... a philosopher must be much more than a philosopher. Plato is a poet." Emerson too is a poet — a poet of ideas. The concern of the poet, Eliot has said, is not thought but "the emotional equivalent of thought." The phrase exactly describes Emerson's concern also. His value to his time and ours was not in new ideas thrown into circulation but in the human urgency, the imaginative vividness he gave, not just to the particular ideas which concerned him, but to the life of thought itself. He makes apparent what philosophers who are no more than philosophers tend to ignore — that thought is not an affair of the intellect alone but of the whole man. To accept an idea, he sees, is not to *speculate*, as we say, but to invest one's life. The play of the mind is for mortal stakes; "to think is to act."

To say this may seem to contradict what was said above about the contradictions in Emerson's thought. Actually the two together permit us to take a further step, now with particular reference to his method in public work like the speeches and essays. (The poems are discussed in another place.) If a thought is an act of choice, and if he was aware of many competing possible choices, each with a claim, if not always an equal one, to consideration, the stage was set for him to "play" various choices and set off one role against another in some kind of dialogue of ideas. Poet that he was, he had considerable natural taste for this. He apprehended ideas dramatically, not intellectually; to him they were ideas *of a person*, functional parts of a personal confrontation of the world, attitudes that implied a dramatic speaker. Instinctively he threw a sharp light on them and made them "tell." His thought is unqualified, not because he was incapable of second thoughts, but because the laborious *ifs* and *buts* of ratiocination had no relevance to his purpose. The accident that the rhetorical tradition in which his prose style was formed has gone out of fashion, while it puts an added distance between him and us, permits us to observe more clearly than his hearers the conscious artistry with which he worked up his part for each platform appearance. Significantly, as his art matured and he found his proper method he became more overtly dramatic. Even *Nature*, where he is least himself, rises to the words of the "Orphic poet" at the end. In the 1840's he commonly assigned his ideas

to appropriate type-characters: the Conservative, the Transcendentalist, the Poet, the Skeptic, and so on. The later essays, too, are sprinkled with imaginary *alter egos* who speak his thoughts for him. Again and again, even when no speaker is named, we find that he has assumed a dramatic personality and is projecting this "slip-off section" of himself with something of the disengagement of an artist of fiction, though so slyly — or perhaps one should say with so little artistic self-consciousness — that we read him heavily and literally, taking every speaker to be the author.

If the preceding remarks give the impression that Emerson is even more elusive than has been supposed, that is no more than the truth. The strongest part of him escapes statement. This is as it should be, for he was a believer in unseizable possibilities and would have been glad to think that he suggested them. There is a secret spring of power in him, a fire at the core "under the Andes," that is felt in all his work without being identifiable in any. It is no moral quality nor literary skill nor any one personal trait but a charged atmosphere which we can sense but not define. The best image for him is perhaps his own Uriel, archangel of the sun, who stands outside human life and yet shakes it with his truth. Through his words we intuit, almost in spite of any intention of his own, a primal realm of being — pure energy, naked spirit, unincarnate life — which lies barely within the reach of thought. Emerson is one of those writers who have enlarged the possibilities of experience.

Note on the Text

WITH the exception of Ralph L. Rusk's *Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1939) there is no definitive text of any part of Emerson's writings, and important parts are in the process of publication or republication. Considerable effort has been exerted to make the text of these selections as accurate as is possible under the circumstances. Apart from the correction of a few errors, the text of the essays and the poems is that in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1904), edited with notes by his son, Edward Waldo Emerson, the so-called Centenary Edition. At the present time this is generally accepted as the standard edition. Kenneth W. Cameron's collation of the texts of *Nature* (Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1940) indicates that this edition is a careful and reliable one, barring minor errors and inconsistencies.

The text of the selections from the journals follows that of the only published edition, the *Journals* of 1909-1914, edited by Edward W. Emerson and Waldo E. Forbes. All selections from the journals, however, have been newly corrected and amplified from the manuscripts, for which privilege I particularly want to thank Professor Edward Waldo Forbes and the Emerson Memorial Association. This anthology, consequently, contains the most complete and accurate text of these selections that is in print, pending the publication of the new edition of the journals now in preparation. In most cases the dating of passages is based on the printed *Journals*. The text of the letters follows Rusk, though I have regularized it for ease of reading. The letters to Carlyle come from *Correspondence of Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1883); those to Ward from *Letters from Ralph Waldo Emerson to a Friend* (1899), both edited by Charles Eliot Norton. It has not been possible to check the MSS. of these. A few selections come from other sources as indicated.

Any anthology based as much as this one is on the journals must encounter the problem of a large and sometimes indispensable group of journal passages that are not yet published and are not now available for publication, namely those Emerson revised and used in his essays. I have adopted the best expedient possible by extracting a minimum number of these from essays not here reprinted and including each under the date of the original journal passage. Since in these cases the text is not that of the manuscript journal, however, I have enclosed the date of all such passages in brackets. The reader should understand, therefore, that the text of a passage under a bracketed date is, in whole or in part, *not* the version in the journal for that

date. When the entire passage comes from an essay, that fact is indicated at the end of the passage (i.e., "From 'The Over-Soul,' " etc.). When the date is bracketed and there is no source indication at the end, then the passage is a composite one put together partly from the printed *Journals* and partly from the *Works* to approximate as closely as is possible a continuous passage in the manuscript journals. The exact sources of all selections are given in the notes (p. 510).

The notes are based on those supplied the *Works* and *Journals* by Edward Waldo Emerson; those signed "E.W.E." are his verbatim, or nearly so. These have been supplemented from the researches of Ralph L. Rusk, Kenneth W. Cameron, Carl F. Strauch and other such sources. The information on the MS. relations of the essays to the journals and the lectures is based on unpublished research by the editor.

Further Reading

MANY good guides to the Emerson literature are easily available. The student should start with the bibliographies in *Emerson Handbook* (1953), by Frederic Ives Carpenter, which also contains much other useful information. Other good annotated lists are in *Eight American Authors* (1956), edited by Floyd Stovall, and in the bibliography edited by Thomas Johnson in R. E. Spiller *et al.*, *Literary History of the United States* (1948), Vol. III. The basic biography, for facts, is Ralph L. Rusk, *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1949). A good introduction to the man is Bliss Perry, *Emerson Today* (1931). Useful accounts of his thought are Henry David Gray, *Emerson* (1917) and Stephen E. Whicher, *Freedom and Fate* (1953). The best comments on Emerson as an artist are in F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* (1941). The most intelligent anti-Emerson statements are perhaps James Truslow Adams, "Emerson Reread," in *Atlantic Monthly* (1930), and the chapter on Emerson in Yvor Winters, *Maule's Curse* (1938). The Emerson bibliography includes essays, pro and con, by nearly every first-rate mind in American intellectual history (on Emerson abroad, see *Emerson Handbook*). Perhaps the most brilliant sympathetic discussion is in John Jay Chapman, *Emerson and Other Essays* (1898).

Other bibliographical references bearing on particular questions are included in the notes.

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